The Ascent of Mount Lillian

The Christening of Lake Bonny Gem

"Aloft, on sky and mountain wall
Are God's great pictures hung."

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BY

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Author's Note

The Kootenay Lake region in southern British Columbia—comprising the Southern Selkirk Mountains—is wild and rugged, and may be likened to Switzerland. Indeed, the Selkirks are the Alps of the North American Continent. The peaks, some of which rise to an elevation as great as ten thousand feet, are crowned with snow at all seasons, and but few of them ever have been climbed or named.

The British Columbian government offers this inducement to explorers: Anyone who ascends an unnamed peak, builds a little cairn and leaves therein a bottle containing a record of the ascent, with facts as to elevation and a name, is permitted to christen the peak. The name is duly gazetted and formally used upon maps of the province.

During a part of the month of July, 1915, the writer was encamped, with two helpers, at Sixteen-Mile Cabin, on Fry River, engaged in the cruise of timber limits embraced within the valley. The Fry is the largest of numerous streams which fall into beautiful Kootenay Lake from the east.

Lying to the south and west was an especially prominent peak which commanded daily observation. When my work was finished I found that I should have a few days at my disposal before the next boat-day, when I was due at the beach; and I decided to attempt the ascent of this peak. Accord-

ingly, my party left camp at about seven o'clock A. M., carrying only a lunch, some matches and a light Hudson's Bay axe.

We went west down the trail until we crossed Sixteen-Mile Creek, which is a very swift stream coming into the Fry from the south, and which drains the eastern slope of the range to which our peak belonged. After crossing the creek we left the trail and started up the ridge, climbing toward the south and west. We held this course for perhaps a mile and a half of very bad going, through timber, the ground cumbered with windfalls and underbrush peculiar to this locality. (The brush on the mountains seldom grows upright, but upward and outward away from the slope; and it is difficult to travel along the side of the slope. It is much easier to go straight up or down.)

When we arrived at a certain open place on the edge of a slide we could see our objective and also a smaller peak farther north and much nearer us. I perceived that it would be better for us to climb the smaller peak first and then cross to the other.

As this point we were close to timber line. The rocks were bare and the going much improved. Here we turned up the mountain, across a big rock slide, in the direction of an almost perpendicular wall of rock which we worked around toward the south and west until we found ourselves behind it, and in what we fittingly termed "the saddle." It was a grass-grown valley between the low rocky ridge that we had just passed and the smaller of the two peaks. Snow lay a few rods away on either side of us, and within a hundred feet two streams were formed—one flowing northward into the Fry at the

Thirteen-Mile Cabin and one east to Sixteen-Mile Creek.

A cold wind was drawing through the saddle, and as we were drenched with perspiration we hastened on up the steep, grassy slope, where wild flowers were growing in profusion. We soon came to small snow-fields, and finally to the ridge, along which there was a cornice of snow, frozen hard. A few minutes more brought us to the bare summit of the peak.

Here we ate our lunch of biscuits, sitting in the cheery sunshine, wet through, but warm and comfortable; while so close to the snow that I could reach it with my left hand from the warm stone which was my seat.

After finishing our lunch we started southward along the ridge, of which the small peak is a part and the large peak the culmination. Arriving at the base of the large peak we found it so steep in many places that sheer climbing was impossible, but by making short detours we worked around and up. Much of the way was over snow and the balance of the distance over a slippery shale rock. Here it was necessary for the man ahead to exercise great care not to start rocks sliding down on the men following. If a slide should begin there would be no stopping—at least not for several hundred feet. Near the top a snow-field, apparently firmly located, proved upon closer proximity to be a hanging cornice which must be avoided; but at last we reached the summit.

One glance at the wonderful panorama there spread out as a visual feast fully repaid us for the time and effort expended in making the ascent. As

far as we could see in every direction were range after range and peak after peak, all snow-crowned and glistening in the bright sunshine of a cloudless day. Half of the country seemed to be snow-covered and the rest was timbered—the streakings of deep green which marked the narrow valleys forming a remarkable contrast to the adjacent whiteness, and greatly enhancing the beauty of the scene.

To the westward, through the opening in the hills down which Fry River makes its way, could be seen a part of Kootenay Lake, and to the northward, nestled against the mountain-side north of the Fry, was a beautiful little lake, having the coloring peculiar to glacial lakes—in fact, to glaciers themselves;—a coloring which apparently includes all shades of blue and green, leaving the observer in doubt as to the actual tint.

The top of the mountain—only fifteen feet across—was bare except for a heavy snow cornice along its eastern edge. I hastily built a cairn, and wrote a few words stating that I had made the ascent and had christened the peak "Mount Lillian," with the date, July twenty-second, 1915. Having no bottle, I placed the paper in the cairn on a stone having a slightly rounded surface, covering it with another stone which exactly matched the lower one. That record will last for years.

There was nothing on the peak to indicate that human beings ever had been there. We found fresh tracks of mountain goat, and under one of the stones of which I built the cairn was a large black ant.

My barometer is graduated to six thousand feet, therefore we could only guess at the altitude; but

timber line in this region is said to be seven thousand five hundred feet, and we were at least one thousand feet above timber line in the exposed places. On the eastern side we were evidently fifteen hundred feet above some considerable snow-fields—and the timber on that side ended far below the snow-fields.

The peak is split and torn, and is rapidly disintegrating. I never have been in a place where the forces of nature were working with such certainty toward destruction. Only a comparatively short period of time will elapse before that peak will cease to be, as several hundred feet of the top will slide into the valley.

To the east and west descent was impossible. To the south it looked to be easier than the way we came up. I decided to go down that way, and found it much better. Were I to make the ascent again I should use that route.

The ridge, with almost perpendicular walls on the sides, descends gradually toward the south, and we followed it as far as the notch, where we left it and walked along a goat-path down the eastern side. Here we encountered large snow-fields; after crossing them we arrived in a park-like place where the surface, boulder-strewn, was grassed over between the rocks and there were literally acres of beautiful wild flowers. I recognized only the hare-bell, heather, and a laurel identical with our swamp laurel in Michigan, except that the shrub here grows barely four inches high. Several little streams fed by melting snow tumble across this park. We crossed the streams, making toward the southeast, to a ridge that evidently ran eastward to Sixteen-Mile Creek.

We struck the ridge and followed it down. The last half of the distance was very steep in some places, so steep that we got into the tops of trees growing along the wall and slid down them to the shelf on which they grew, and so came to Sixteen-Mile Creek. Crossing the stream to its eastern side we pursued its course—though keeping well up in the timber, until we reached the trail; and arrived at camp about 7:30.

I hope sometime to make this ascent again, in which case I shall provide myself with a camera, and a barometer graduated to fifteen thousand feet. So equipped I can make an accurate record, and report to the government; and if no one else is ahead of me, will have the name gazetted. Until then the name means nothing to anyone except the three members of the cruising party who made the ascent. They are happy in being numbered now among the few individuals supremely privileged to behold the grandeur of the Canadian Rockies from one of their highest peaks.

The Christening of Lake Bonny Gem

The day following our ascent of Mount Lillian we broke camp at the Sixteen-Mile Cabin and packed over to the Twelve-Mile Cabin.

From the summit of Mount Lillian we had observed, off to the north, clinging to the side of a mountain, a wonderful little lake. West of the lake a gigantic saw-tooth ridge arose, leaning into the northwest; and west of the ridge was a glacier. Two streams, one the outlet of the lake and the other formed at the termination of the glacier, united at the foot of a "horse-shoe" fall to form the creek that comes into Fry River at Twelve-Mile Cabin, making that camp the logical point from which to ascend to the lake.

As we did not care to go to the beach before Sunday (Tuesday being boat-day), we decided to have a look at the lake. The weather in the morning was fine, and our party—Mr. J. L. Wright, Mr. John Monaghan and myself—made an early start, taking a small lunch in our pockets.

For the first mile the going was very bad, through thick undergrowth and windfall. We followed the course of the stream, keeping well up on the slope west of the creek. The mile of bad going, in which the rise is about one thousand five hundred feet, took us to the foot of the horse-shoe—a little glade where the grass was luxuriant and wild flowers abundant. We crossed the stream exactly at the

fork, stopping to have a drink, and observed that the water of the west branch was much colder than that of the east, the difference being caused by the fact that the eastern stream was much more x-posed to sunlight.

Keeping to the eastern side we ascended. We found good going all the way from the forks. We were above the timber. The way was steep, very steep. We climbed for two hours, stopping once in a while for breath and to examine the floral wonders standing to await our approbation wherever there was soil sufficient for a root-hold. The higher we climbed the more numerous were the flowers. I knew very few of them. Many are similar to those that grow at lower altitudes; some differ only in color. The columbine is of a wonderful golden hue and I wondered if the insect friends of the plant at this altitude prefer yellow, thus indicating a reason for the change of color.

We had been going almost north and chiefly up when the surface smoothed out a little and the trend of the valley turned westward.

A few minutes more and we beheld it!

No words can adequately describe that lake.

It covers about fifty acres and has two tiny islands; the shores are solid rock rising perpendicularly, in no place high above the surface of the water, but evidently reaching down to unknown depths.

We arrived at the outlet, which is at the lake's eastern side. Looking west, immediately across is the glacier, coming down to the edge of the water; and on either side of the glacier rise forbidding-looking saw-tooth ridges. The glacier, though small,

is very interesting, and exhibits both lateral and terminal moraines.

We were at snow-line, for on the western side of the lake there is always snow, yet we stood on a carpet of soft, curly, dry grass sprinkled with the ubiquitous mountain flowers, which may be found growing close to the edge of melting snow.

I thought of the "Lady of the Lake," and in mental picture I could see the maiden in her shallop rounding the nearest island.

Now, the color of the water. How can I describe it? We saw the green of emeralds, the blue of sapphires, with a "glint o' light" here and there suggesting diamonds. This idea of gems to form a name came first to Wright. He said, "Let's call it Bonny Gem!" John and I agreed that no other name could be so appropriate.

We could only conjecture in regard to the lake's origin. Most of the small lakes at the head of mountain streams have been formed by slides that have blocked the channel, or they are the craters of extinct volcanoes, or were scooped out by glaciers.

I believe that none of these methods of world-building could have been used in creating Bonny Gem. It seems more probable that an almost bottomless pit was formed by some action of Energy near what is now the middle of the lake, and that, during the ages, the sides of this pit wall had broken and sloughed off gradually through the effect of frost. The perpendicular walls show a clean fracture, rough, as if newly broken; the grain of the rock always at right angles to the line of fracture.

We had no way of determining the depth of the water, but all appearances indicate an immense

depth. On the western side, where, for unmeasured time, the glacier has been dumping boulders into the lake, I expected to find shallow water, but upon arriving there I discovered the same perpendicular wall, with boulders balanced on the brink. These are sure to be rolled in with the coming of another winter; and the water at this point had the prevailing color and offered no further answer to my interrogation of Nature.

The lake is bounded on the three remaining sides by gently-sloping, grass-clothed valley walls. A few gnarled and stunted larches grow near the outlet, where the rock formation is identical with the rest of the shore, precluding a possibility that the lake had been formed by a slide. The islands, one near the eastern side not far from the outlet and the other on the western side well to the north, furnish an additional charm to an altogether entrancing scene.

Mr. Wright said, "Mr. Seaman, there are only a few of the elect who ever are privileged to view such beauty;" and that is true. It requires work, hard work, and lots of it to surmount opposing conditions and bring one to the places where such marvels may be seen.

We sat on the dry grass and ate our lunch, after which Mr. Wright and I started west around the lake. We found a series of little ponds, like fish ponds, nestling in the grass, close together, no two on the same level—an unexpected natural curiosity. I started a blue grouse and it treed a short distance away; I tried to get a shot, but failed.

Just then Mr. Wright said, "Well, if I don't go up now that I am so near I shall not go at all."

I said, "It's two o'clock and too late to climb that peak today."

He asked me when I was going down, and which way.

I replied that I should leave at about five o'clock and return by the same route as far as the forks; from there I intended keeping to the east of the creek in the green timber, as I thought it would be better walking. He started upward, saying that he would climb for an hour and a half and if he could not make the summit would return.

I believed that he would not climb farther than the top of the grassy ridge leading up to the saw-tooth, and I continued my circuit of the lake, coming back to where Monaghan lay on the grass. I inquired if he had seen anything of Wright. He said that he had seen him away up at the second slash; that he had walked into the slash and had not reappeared. I looked at that slash for several moments, and decided that I could not have seen a man there; and I felt a perfect assurance that my eyes were as good as John's. I did not think Wright would go so far, anyway. I concluded that he had crossed the ridge and gone to camp.

I said, "We will wait until five and then race for camp. There's a storm coming up." This was evident, as the clouds had begun to gather shortly after Wright left.

In the meantime I looked around for indications of any previous visit of human beings to the spot, and found none; no sign that camp ever had been made there, and I think that no white men ever have spent a night on the shores of Bonny Gem. The lake is known to a few trappers and hunters and probably has been visited by prospectors in their never-ending quest of gold. I am told that Mr. Hale Thompson, now mayor of Chicago, with a companion and guide once visited the lake while on a hunting trip.

I saw numerous tracks of mountain goat, and almost every small boulder lying on the grassy, park-

like slope had been overturned by bears in their search for ants, of which they are very fond.

Five o'clock came, and no sign of Wright. He carried my revolver and he had matches; we had none. On the remote possibility that he had not returned home I left a note for him in a split stake at the outlet, and my little axe; and then we pulled, or rather slid for camp. The storm broke as we arrived at the forks and we were soaked when we reached camp—and no Wright. I never felt so mean in all my life. It would soon be dark. We had no lantern. I imagined all sorts of dire happenings that might have befallen him.

We were a gloomy pair. We got supper and ate it, sitting under the wicky-up sheltered from the rain; but we wished we were out on the mountain with Wright. We made a batch of biscuits, with the determination to start at daybreak, which comes early in this latitude, and go back to find our comrade.

At ten we "turned in," as we call going to bed. We simply kick off our shoes and lie down. We had not been undressed at night for weeks. Then, soon after lying down, we heard Wright shout. I was glad. I jumped up and stirred the fire, and he stepped into the circle of light—a picturesque figure. He had lost his hat; the seat of his trousers was torn out; one trousers leg was torn from the bottom nearly to the belt; he had shot a blue grouse and it was hanging from his belt behind and looked as though he had drowned it instead of shooting it. He was dead tired, but gloriously happy. He had made the ascent of a peak from the top of which he could look down on the summit of Mount Lillian; had encountered many difficult places; had been turned back twice. At his third attempt he succeeded in gaining the top, where he built a cairn of stones, and, thinking

of the beautiful lilies growing in the grass at the lake, he named the peak Mount Lilias. I was amused when I heard this, for I had not yet told him of the name I had given to my mountain. I thought that if we had been able to meet the requirements of the British Columbian government in regard to a complete report of our explorations, the officials would have considered this a strange coincidence—the naming of two peaks in the same locality, one, "Mount Lillian," and the other, "Mount Lilias." But it did not signify that the two explorers were in love with the same girl.

Mr. Wright had made a serious mistake in trying to descend by a different way than that by which he ascended. He was obliged to retrace the course first chosen and find a more feasible route. The rain that caught us near the forks was snow on the mountain. He was hindered by it. Also, the light, which lasted as long as he was high up on the slopes, changed into pitchy darkness as soon as he struck the timber. He literally felt his way down, guided by the roar of the stream—a very trying experience and an altogether dangerous adventure. The wise and safe proceeding would have been to travel as long as he could see and then wait until daybreak, when he could go on safely.

On his return Mr. Wright did not pass the outlet, so my note and axe must be there yet, the only tokens of our visit.

I remarked to the young man that I did not suppose he was such a consummate ass as to try that peak alone, or I would not have left the lake without him. In reality there is nothing asinine about Mr. Wright. He is a fine fellow, a graduate of the University of Toronto, a most loyal Canadian. He has the pluck to conceive more than he has strength to execute.

On the following day we broke camp and packed twelve miles to the beach. Wright was so nearly "done out" that Monaghan and I took in our packs all the camp outfit and our own personal effects, leaving him only his own bed and clothing to carry. We stopped at our six-mile cache for lunch, and from there to the beach I took on part of Wright's personal effects. In that way he made the trip, but was too tired to get supper or to eat.

We put up our tent in the edge of the bushes for the night. The midges kept us awake. The following evening—our last on Kootenay Lake—we were invited to the home of Mr. Lindsey, who was to take us to Kaslo in his launch.

A party of high school girls and boys from Nelson were camping at the beach. Their idea of an outing was to be up making night hideous and then sleep all day. They saw us pass their tent and go to ours when we returned from Mr. Lindsey's.

I said to the boys, "I'm going to take my blankets and go right down to the edge of the water and spread them on the sand. It's cool there and I don't think the midges will bother." They approved of the proposition and we had just settled ourselves on the sand when the high school bunch started a serenade. They were in the bushes around our tent, evidently thinking they had us surrounded. They couldn't get us out, and went away only to come back again, and yet again. The last time, knowing we were Yankees and assuming that we were dead, they started singing, "John Brown's Body Lies a Mouldering in the Grave."

One of our party gathered some twigs, built a fire, and they could then see us in our blankets near the water.

The next day we went to Kaslo, and proceeded on our journey home.